

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
Extension Service, Division of Agricultural Economics
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"COMMUNITY IMPROVEMENT ORGANIZATION" TYPE OF PROGRAM
IN THE SOUTHERN STATES 1/

Some Results and Methods

A particular kind of a community organization and development program has been underway in the Southern States for a number of years. It consists of the formation of small "community improvement clubs", here called or "community organizations", to which all families belong. Each organization has a set of regular officers, regular monthly meetings of an educational-social nature, and a program of farm, home and community improvement activities as decided by the groups themselves. Most of these community organizations range from 30 to 75 families in size.

Another part of the program, in most sections, is the community improvement contest, awarding those which made the greatest progress during the year in farm, home, and community improvement. Usually these contests are under the sponsorship of urban or commercial interests within a county and the larger trade area of a city. This community improvement organization-and-contest type of program began on a large scale first in Tennessee about 10 years ago.

Today, 500 to 1000 communities are so organized in Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana and Tennessee, and the program is spreading into Virginia, North and South Carolina, Arkansas and across into Texas and Oklahoma. 2/ A somewhat similar program in the form of a Neighborhood Improvement contest, under auspices of the Farmer-Stockman farm magazine, has been already underway in these latter two States.

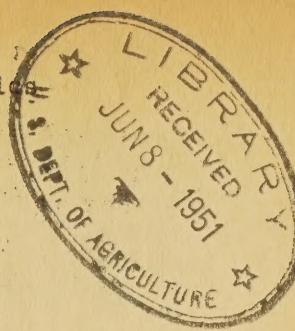
Below are some results or advantages, suggestions, and precautions for this community organization and development program based upon observed results and experience with such a program in actual operation, for the guidance of State and county extension services.

1. A community organization and development program helps to establish closer relationships between town and country people. City people are brought to have a better understanding of what rural people are doing, and vice versa.

2. Community organization establishes a structural basis and procedure for promoting farm and home improvements, such as soil conservation, profitable livestock and cropping practices, better farm planning, home food production and preservation, and modernization of buildings. They also carry

1/ Adapted from a workshop committee report and reports from States by extension community organization specialists and rural sociologists, 48th annual meeting of the Southern Agricultural Workers Association, Memphis, Tennessee, February 1951.

2/ The community organization program in Louisiana, now over 25 years old, does not have the contest feature; and there are many cases of individual community development projects without contests in various States.



out activities of a community-wide nature and brings about community-wide improvements. For example, improvement clubs have beautified church and cemetery property, beautified roadsides and homesteads, built local health centers, built playgrounds and developed community recreation programs, sponsored 4-H clubs and home demonstration clubs, established library service, and sponsored chest X-ray and other health education programs.

3. Community organization gives a community-wide acceptance to programs which are undertaken, thereby creating a certain "social pressure" for general participation and adoption of practice.

4. A community organization and development program is a means for placing regular extension program planning on a community basis. In Georgia, regular county extension program planning is carried on through a County Agricultural Program Planning Committee made up of delegates from the various community improvement clubs and other community areas of the county. County planning is preceded by planning meetings within the communities by the people in their own local groups. In Alabama and Georgia, broad county programs are set up outlining general points for emphasis for the year, which are in turn, helpful to community planning.

5. Community organization and development program is an effective means of integrating not only agricultural agencies but also the efforts of other organizations and agencies such as the county welfare and health departments, school, church, and local government.

6. Community organization furthers extension education and other public agency programs, by providing an effective local unit through which to reach greater numbers of people. And one which county agents are relatively free from having to operate themselves. That is, the groups plan, publicize, and run their own meetings and organization activities, when the organizations are established soundly and the agents' relations with them are on a sound basis.

7. However, a certain amount of servicing on the part of state and county extension agents helps to make this type of community organization and development most successful. A state newsletter may be a good idea. Some counties have 1-day training schools for community organization officers. A county wall map showing the organized territory and that not yet covered is helpful. Alabama has published a bulletin on suggestions for good meetings. For the county staff, community organizations may also sometimes mean more local meetings. But it is not an "additional" program, as much as it is a means of doing extension work in a different way. At first, there may be some tendency for new organizations to depend too much upon extension services. At this point, it is important that such organizations not be over-nursed, but be placed on their own initiative. At the same time, there is need for guidance.

8. It is important not to urge the community to organize before it is ready for such a step. Readiness should be developed through individual contact with leaders and with other communities.

9. A promotion of community improvement clubs should not be based upon entrance into a contest. Rather the contest should be a motivation and not an organization requirement. It may be joined after community organization has been accomplished. Care should be taken not to over-emphasize contest winning. Much care should be given to development of the scoring basis of the contest in order that it be as broad as possible in line with program objectives and sound psychological principles. It is believed best for contest scoring to be on a fairly broad basis, rather than on the basis of a long list of minute and specific practices. For example, in Tennessee the basis of scoring is as follows: 200 points for development and improvement of sound systems of farming and other sources of income; 200 points for good home food supply and management; 200 points for development and improvement of farm and home appearance, comfort and convenience; and 400 points for development and improvement of desirable community organization and methods, community services, and community life.

10. Community organization and planning must be a teamwork proposition in which all extension personnel contribute their own specialized programs, and which is a part of program planning. In Tennessee, various State extension specialists and supervisors go out to help communities form improvement clubs, and help with contest judging.

11. In order to be successful, a community organization and development program must be a stated policy on the part of the extension service, the college, or whatever agency is providing the leadership. This makes for teamwork of the staff, and for uniformity between sections of the State in general features of the program. It is not an additional program, but a means of doing extension in a different way. Thus it involves all the staff.

12. It is believed better if, as a rule, urban sponsorship is by a commercial group representing a community of business interests, such as a Agricultural committee or Farmers' club of a chamber of commerce, a junior chamber of commerce, community development council, or similar group, rather than by a single firm. In Tennessee local business people help with judging the community improvement contests.

13. Sound community organization requires that the program not be tied up with a particular organization or agency which has an ulterior interest other than education and leadership.

14. There is a need for close relationship between extension work on community organization and development and sociological research. Research is needed on such topics as what makes good meetings, how to motivate people, effects of contests, effective ways of evaluating programs, relation of local and outside assistance in organizing a community, and desirable forms of organization to fit the town-centered communities or other different conditions.

This "community club" type of organization is particularly suited to the South, where so far there are many small communities and neighborhoods, and not a great deal of other organizations. It is also especially timely, for it can act as a counterbalance to the increased complexity of organization that is occurring now from the increased diversity of farming, growth of small industries and towns, and changing make-up of the rural population with many rural people working away from home in nonfarm employment. The community club and the local church can and are serving as unifying factors in this situation.

The community club type of organization is adjustable to this trend and to town-centered communities. Cases are now occurring in Georgia and the other States where the community club may meet only 4 times a year as a whole-community general meeting, and in the meantime continue working through committees and subgroups in more or less community council style. In other cases, community clubs are federating into some kind of a county council or federated organization.

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